

Outline for Parsha Behar, 5765

By Joel Wiesen

Shabbat Shalom.

1. Some people do great evil and some do great good.

From our tradition we know us each of us has within us the potential for great good and the potential for great evil.

Our tradition teaches:

- We need to **learn** the mitzvot so we will know the path for good.
- We need to **follow** the mitzvot to help control our inclination to evil.

2. But wait a minute, from a non-traditional viewpoint we can say, Why read the Torah, since we each know right from wrong?

- For our own sense of right and wrong we can thank our parents and other relatives, our grade school teachers, and the newspapers, and TV and the movies.

3. Now, the traditional Jewish view is that it is ignorance or arrogance to think that without formal, adult study of our tradition we each know right from wrong.

- We Jews are not self-commanded and self-guided. Our tradition commands and guides us. We cannot expect to find the right path merely by searching deep in our souls.
- This traditional view does not square well with the American spirit of individualism and independence.
- The mores of our American society, however, do not necessarily reflect proper living, what with much sordid Rap Music, and glorification of violence and gratuitous sex in the movies and TV, and prevalent gross dishonesty in business, for starters.
- Our tradition expects us, as responsible adults, to continually strive to clarify our understanding of morality, and the right way to live, as embodied in the Torah, the Talmud, and the other sources.

4. Let's see what life guidance we get from this week's parsha, Behar.

- Parshat Behar begins by telling us about the sabbatical year: A year when we may not work the land in Israel.

[lev 25:2 When you come into the land which I give you...]

5. What does it mean to have God tell us not to work the land?

- But it's our land!
- But it's our main source of food!
- We'll starve!

6. Let's look at the parsha more closely as we puzzle thru this.
The very opening sentences contain several mitzvot concerning the sabbatical year:
 - We may not plant our fields (Lev. 25:4)
 - We may not prune our vineyards (Lev. 25:4)
 - We may not systematically harvest what grows wild in the sabbatical year (Lev. 25:5)
7. Partly based on this, our sages learn these important lessons:
 - The land is not truly ours (see Lev 25:23, "Land is Mine.")
 - All we have is on loan from its ultimate maker and owner, the Master of the Universe, Ribbon kol ha-olamim.
8. Related to this, the Rabbis instituted brachot for food. These brachot are intended to do at least two things:
 - One, to remind us that our food is, in large part, a gift of God.
 - Two, to turn what might otherwise be mundane daily activities of survival or indulgence into daily acts of acknowledgment, reverence and thanks.

The rabbis of the Talmud were brilliant. Brachot have been one of the mainstays of the Jewish people for the past 2,000 years.

9. This is why each time we eat or drink, we are to make a bracha.
 - In making a bracha, we acknowledge and thank God for having provided us the opportunity to eat.
10. Let's look briefly the 6 brachot we say over food.
 - Four are quite familiar and 2 may be less familiar.

The four familiar brachot are:

- HaMotzi lechem min ha-aretz (bring forth bread from the earth)
- Borei pri ha-gafen (who creates fruit of the vine)
- Borei pri ha-etz (who creates fruit of the tree)
- Borei pri ha-adama (who creates fruit of the ground)

The other two are:

- Borei minei mezonot (who creates various types of food)
 - on non-bread grain products
- Shehakol nihiyeh bidvaro (through whose word all was created)
 - on all other foods, including dairy, meat, fish

There is a handout at the back of the room with a list of the 6 brachot over food and a little more detail on what each is used for.

11. Saying a bracha before eating is not difficult, after we memorize the **six** brachot. But saying a bracha but might be seen by some as a bit strange, for example in the middle of the company cafeteria. Luckily saying a bracha need not be noticeable to those we might be eating with.

12. Even tho it may be easy to do, saying a bracha over food, or taking on any mitzva, such as putting on tefillin in the morning in shul or at home, can be a real challenge for several reasons.
 - Any change can be uncomfortable
 - There is anxiety that we will not do it right, and perhaps someone will notice.
 - Fortunately, there are self help books, tapes, and videos to help us learn, as well as Dan Nesson and others.

13. When do we decide to or try to change?
 - American culture seems to say to us, wait to try something new until you want to.
 - Jewish tradition says something very different to us. Do it, and it will, over time, become comfortable and enhance our lives.
 - As Hillel says, if not now, when?

14. This little discussion of change is related to an important psychological principle, known to our sages. It is a principle that cuts two ways:
 - Do things **right** for a while, and doing it right will become comfortable to us.
 - Do things **wrong** for a while, and doing it wrong will become comfortable to us.
 As our Torah says, right and wrong are in front of us. The choice is ours.
 - Lest this seem completely daunting, we need to recognize that no person can ever be completely and fully observant.
 - All of us are on a ladder of observance. We are where we are. Sometimes we climb up and sometimes we move down.
 - But, all the time, we know which way is up.

15. Now let's look at another mitzva in the Parsha: Lev 25:14 on buying and selling.
 - This mitzva concerns justice between buyer and seller, and tells us not to wrong the other person in buying/selling
 - The halacha related to this gets into such things as when is a sale final: Is it:
 - when a verbal agreement is made?
 - when money changes hands?
 - when the object changes hands?

The halacha clarifies these details of commerce, so all parties know the ground rules for buying and selling.

In addition, Certain safeguards are placed on commerce, for example:

- The selling price may differ from the real value by no more than 1/6. If it differs by more than 1/6, the sale may be voided, after the fact.
 - This compares favorably to the American maxim: Let the Buyer Beware
- There are many details of implementation of this mitzva, but the thrust is clear, we are to be fair in buying and selling.

16. Let's look at another mitzvot in the Parsha: Lev 25:17, on not oppressing others, with words
There are many aspects to this commandment. For example, from the Talmud we learn:

- Do not tell donkey drivers looking for work that Mr. Ploni has grain to haul, if it is not so.
- Do not ask a shopkeeper the price of an item if you have no intention of buying it.
- Do not inflict pain on your spouse or children with words, but it is OK to teach morals/ethics
- Do not slander

17. Let's look at another mitzva in the Parsha: Lev 26:1, Not bowing down to idols

- The Torah has many injunctions not to worship idols
 - Idolatry was a palpable challenge to Judaism for so long it has shaped our thought
 - Perhaps today the challenge to Jews and Judaism is less from idolatry and more from apathy
- Bowing down to an idol is a denial of our one True God, so not surprisingly it is treated seriously
 - Perhaps we might see it akin to what our spouse might think if we were unfaithful
- We still have a practice related to the prohibition of idolatry in yian mevushal, cooked wine.
 - Kosher wine is often marked yian mevushal, or cooked wine, in small Hebrew or English letters. This is due to a fear stated in the Talmud that idolaters might have access to our wine and offer a libation, which would render all wine in the container completely treif, as treif as pork fat. Cooked wine is not fit to offer to an idol, per rabbis of the Talmud, so we need not worry about that if the wine is cooked.
- Poskim even from as long ago as the middle ages are divided as to whether there are still real idolaters after the time of the Talmud. The Conservative view seems to be a composite.
 - The C view is: We hold any wine is ok, but we should use kosher wine for rituals.

18. We can see reflections of the mitzvot from our parsha in the siddur, in our daily liturgy
(Omit if time running short.)

Our siddur guides us to make clear requests of God and to give thanks for the gifts we enjoy.

- In the Amida, the most central prayer said 3x daily (see daily siddur under the chairs)
 - We give thanks to God. This is similar to the brachot we say over food (pg 62 Silverman siddur)
- As the brachot over food, the amida assumes we can communicate to a listening God.

- The amida guides us to say several prayers:
 - Prayer for wisdom and repentance - pg 56 Silverman siddur
 - Prayer for forgiveness -pg 56 Silverman siddur
 - Prayer for health and long life - pg 57 Silverman siddur
 - Prayer to accept our prayers - pg 60 Silverman siddur
 - Prayer for Peace - pg 66 Silverman siddur

- In other ways also, the siddur guides us as we pray. It embodies a very personal relationship w Gd:
 - We thank Gd for waking up each morning
 - We plea, each day, for Gd to keep us from sin and yezer ha-ra, evil inclination (pg 11 in Silverman siddur)
 - We beseech Gd for sustenance
 - We beseech Gd for protection - pg 24 Silverman siddur

- 19. In the Talmud, in maschecht Shabbat, the tractate named Shabbat, on page 31, side A, Raba, one of the Talmudic sages, speaks of judgement after death and says,
 - when we each come to the heavenly court, and our life on earth is reviewed, we will be asked several questions.
 - The first two questions we will be asked, are:
 - Did you deal faithfully with others in business? and
 - Did you fix time for learning Torah?
 - The rabbis of the Talmud, the rabbis whose decisions our religion is based on, teach us that a religious life has to:
 - have considerable focus on concern for other people.
 - be based on Torah study (broadly interpreted as Torah, Talmud, codes and commentary)
 - Today's parsha, parshat Behar, is probably one of the sources of Raba's statement.

- 20. When we met 2 weeks ago Hy Kempler gave a drosh on Parshat Kedoshim, holiness, and Hy asked two things:
 - "What does it mean to be holy?"
 - "What should we do to become holy?"
 - His answer, as I understood it, included:
 - following the commandments in parshat Kedoshim
 - observing Shabbat and celebrating Shabbat, especially with others
 - accepting each other and ourselves.

- 21. Today's parsha also contains wisdom to guide our daily lives:
 - In business
 - In eating
 - In other ways we have not even touched on in this drosh.

The implication is clear:

- We, as serious Jewish adults, need to study, to learn, and to follow our tradition's precious and sacred rules for living.
 - Hy's drosh suggests we do so with a positive attitude towards ourselves and others.
22. There are many resources for learning more about the mitzvot. One place to start is list of sources at the end of a drosh I gave last year. That drosh is posted on the minyan website: www.mahadash.com/Emanuel. A link to it is listed at the bottom of the HANDOUT.
23. Perhaps next year our minyan will offer us new opportunities for study. The minyan coordinators are considering some options now.

Shabbat Shalom.

Handout for Parsha Behar, 5765 Learning Resources

Prepared by Joel Wiesen

The Blessings Before Eating Various Foods

1. *HaMotzi lechem min ha-aretz* (bring forth bread from the earth):
 - over bread and matzah, and all else that is part of the meal.
2. *Borei pri ha-gafen* (who creates fruit of the vine):
 - over wine (and grape juice).
3. *Borei minei mezonot* (who creates various types of food):
 - over non-bread baked goods made from the 5 grains (wheat, barley, rye, oats or spelt). This includes cookies and cakes.
4. *Borei pri ha-etz* (who creates fruit of the tree):
 - over fruit of a tree in its usual forms (e.g., a raw apple).
5. *Borei pri ha-adama* (who creates fruit of the ground):
 - over produce which grows in or from the ground, in its usual forms (e.g., fresh strawberries, cooked beans).
6. *Shehakol nihiyeh bidvaro* (through whose word all was created):
 - over all other foods (including water). This includes a wide range of foods, such as: soda, beer, milk, cheese, candy, fish, and meat.

Other Learning Resources

A number of Conservative learning resources are listed here (a handout from a drosh I gave last summer): http://mahadash.com/Emanuel/docs/Reeh_5764_Wiesen.pdf